

Excerpt from  
“A WARM PLACE TO SIT”  
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*(Collection of Stories)*

By Dave Jones

You approach your mother's deathbed with an expectation, I suppose; some final admonition to look after your brother and sister; an expression of deep love, no regrets; at minimum a look that suggests your life has been, after all, one of her greatest accomplishments. You expect there might be a final moment when the bond between mother and son will be reaffirmed, no matter the strains over the years, no matter the barriers that couldn't be breached in simple conversation. Most of all you expect something – a look, a blink of an eyelash, a faint squeeze of hand -- that not only validates who you are, who you have become, but hints at a sense of meaning and purpose to her own life, as well.

But it wasn't to be so with Amanda. Our last hours together seemed cluttered and random like much of the rest of her life. Four anxious, teary eyed adults rolling around the hospital room like billiard balls, each carrying their own private grief, baggage, grudge. The nurse coming in at odd intervals to check the stats glowing green, blue and white from the machine beside the bed, adjusting the IV drip of morphine, brushing back the hair from the bloodless, now almost bluish face. The doctor shrugging his shoulders at his patient's unwillingness to answer his questions. And Amanda, lying there with her green eyes open and her attention fixed on meaningless points around the room, counting, sometimes silently, sometimes in the raspy whisper

that wasn't so different from her normal voice -- "four thousand twenty three, four thousand twenty four, four thousand twenty five...."

"I don't get the counting," my brother Cal said, slipping past me on his way to the window for the twentieth time. He wore a simple black t-shirt with blue jeans and no belt -- Cal the minimalist hairstylist.

"There's nothing to get," said London from her station near the night stand at the head of Amanda's bed. "She's just counting. No rhyme or reason." London was the youngest of us kids and the most educated -- a law degree, which Amanda said proved there were horse thieves somewhere in her father's family tree. She was also the only blond and the only one to have offspring of her own -- two boys, Mat and Clay, named for their maternal and paternal grandfathers.

"But it's just so bizarre," said Cal looking out the window at the partial view of the foothills behind the University Hospital. "I mean, what is she counting? Sheep? Is she trying to go to sleep?"

"The doctor said earlier that she might have had a little stroke. She may just be counting on auto pilot." This was Peter, our stepfather. At least one of them. Cal and I had had three, London only two, because her dad counted for one of ours. Peter could be annoying because he was so damned malleable. Never an opinion, never a contrary comment. He seemed to exist to restate other people's opinions, a trait which must have served him well during his eleven years of marriage to Amanda, because he was the longest serving of her spouses. Peter had straight gray hair that he combed straight back. He had been an insurance broker and still handled a few accounts for a dwindling number of friends. He was sitting low in the easy chair near the window, his fingertips joined over his chest in the shape of a clam shell. He wore a sports coat. Always did.

"Four thousand thirty eight, four thousand thirty nine...." Amanda's counting became audible again. She kept doing that -- counting out loud for a while, then her voice would fade to a whisper, barely a breath

passing between her moving lips. It was as if she was joining the conversation every now and then, offering up a few numeric comments just so we knew where she was in the progression.

“I don’t buy it,” I said after her voice faded to a whisper again. “She’s aware of what she’s doing. I don’t know the reason, but she’s doing it consciously.” This was me playing Mel the wise, the perceptive but slightly cynical interpreter of Amanda’s actions. It had always been my role as the oldest child growing up. Whenever Amanda would take us on one of her meandering drives through the city, long drawn out affairs that could sometimes last an hour or two and for which she always insisted there was no particular destination, I would give Cal and London a special look and nod that said “We’re going somewhere.” Because we always were.

Once we ended up at the home of a man who owned two Irish Wolfhounds. They were huge, shabby dogs that looked like they had been put together with left over scraps of thread and yarn. Amanda made a special point of telling us the dogs would only live to be four or five. “It’s like they have to grow big to make up for living such a short time.” A year later, that man, Eddie, became stepfather number two and came to live with us in the apartment Amanda was fixing up on the second floor of the old paint and glass building that had been her father’s legacy. Eddie helped with supplies and tools from his chain of building supply stores. The wolfhounds finished their short lives with his ex-wife.

Another time we ended up at the State Capitol where a young, long haired aide to the Governor gave us a back room tour of the executive offices and Legislative chambers. I remember Amanda strolling down a curved aisle of old roll top desks saying, “This is where the laws get made. This is where all the tax dollars get spent.” The young man stood with Cal, London and me at the end of the aisle, looking somewhat mesmerized as Amanda strolled up and down the aisles in the Senate Chamber, as if testing the space for its compatibility with some grand vision. Amanda didn’t marry that young man (I forget his name) but he helped her win her first and only State Senate race.

“You always read too much into her actions,” London said. Her blond hair was pulled back into a pony tail, revealing faint blue veins at her temples. Her eyes were red from being daubed with the Kleenex she held in her left hand. In her right hand she held a slender cell phone. She had been trying to reach one of her boys and was clearly annoyed with getting nothing but voicemail. “For once can we just assume there is no point, no hidden motive? She’s just dying, for God sake.”

“Assume whatever you want,” I said, with a nod. “But we are going somewhere.”